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ABSTRACT

This study examined an ecologically-based Head Start parent education program to determine if it reduced parents' potential for child abuse. Seventeen mothers who had been referred to the program received training in child care and development, nonviolent discipline methods, stress management, and communication. Support groups and home visits were also conducted. The Child Abuse Potential (CAP) Inventory (Form VI) was used as a pre- and post-test. To evaluate the efficacy of the intervention, parents in their second year with the program had treatment, were tested, had treatment, and were tested again, while parents in their first year with the program were tested, had treatment, and were tested again. The first testing of the first year group served as the control. The evaluation found that while CAP pretest scores indicated that participants had a high potential for abuse, the posttest scores of the second year group indicated significantly reduced potential for abuse. Interview data indicated extensive and severe problems in many areas of the parents' lives, an impression not seen in the CAP scores. The results suggest that the length of program participation may be a key factor in prevention/intervention programs for child maltreatment. (MDM)

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An Ecological Approach to Integrating Child Maltreatment Program Research with Program Planning

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Child abuse is a complex, pervasive problem. In this study, a Head Start parent education program based on Belsky's (1980) adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model was evaluated to determine if it reduced the parents' potential for child abuse.

Study Setting and Sample

The study's setting was a Resource Center for Parents and Children, funded by a Head Start Expansion Grant, that addressed the needs of the entire family system at the ecological levels in order to reduce parents' potential to abuse children.

The sample consisted of 17 mothers (11 Caucasion, 5 African-American, 1 Hispanic) enrolled in the Center who met Head Start income guidelines, had children two to four years old, and were identified as potential child abusers. Participants were either in their first year (8 mothers) or second year (9 mothers) of participation. Of these, 10 mothers were referred from health or social service agencies and 7 were self-referred, parents who recognized their own feelings of losing control.

Insert Table 1 About Here

Educational Program

Recognizing that child abuse may occur due to the interactions of many factors at different levels of the ecological system, the Center addressed as many of these factors as pos-

sible. Training was offered in child care and development, non-violent discipline methods, stress management, and communication. Staff helped parents nullify and restructure dysfunctional family and societal myths and cultural patterns. Support groups, home visits, and transportation to classes were also offered. For children, infant health screening and assessment, medical and dental care (birth to 6), and Head Start classes (3 to 6 years) were offered.

Instrumentation, Research Design, and Analysis

The three research measures were: (1) the Child Abuse Potential (CAP) Inventory (Form VI) (Milner, 1986), used as a pre- and posttest instrument; (2) weekly reports of stressful events, coping strategies, and positive events, used to interpret program usefulness; and (3) educational class closures, used to determine feelings about the class sessions.

In the study design, a modification of Campbell's and Stanley's (1963) Recurrent Institutional Cycle design, participants were divided into groups of parents who were in their first and second years of Resource Center participation. The second year group had treatment, was tested, had treatment, and was tested again. The first year group was tested, had treatment, and was tested again. The first testing of the first year group served as the control group.

CAP Inventory data were analyzed using *t*-tests and measures of central tendency. For the other data, researcher interpretative analysis was employed.

Results

1. Pretest CAP Inventory scores presented a picture of participants as having high potential to abuse.

Insert Table 2 About Here

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2. The second year group had significant differences between pre- and posttest scores. Their scores fell from an elevated position, indicating they possessed characteristics of known child abusers, to a non-elevated position. Factor analysis indicated distress and unhappiness were significantly reduced.

Insert Table 3 About Here

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3. Significant differences were found for agency- and self-referred parents on the CAP Inventory pretest. The mean score for agency-referred parents was elevated, indicating their potential to physically abuse their children, and significantly higher than that of the self-referred parents which was not elevated.

Insert Table 4 About Here

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4. Interview data indicated extensive and severe problems in many areas of the parents' lives, an impression not seen through the CAP Inventory. These included social interactional,

financial, legal, employment, and mental and physical health problems.

Conclusions

Although caution must be used in forming conclusions, the findings suggest something not found in the extensive literature review: **the length of program participation may be a key factor in prevention/intervention programs for child maltreatment.**

Pragmatic Applications

Since the family is a system with many influencing factors, one programmatic approach is to plot the influences and relationships within the ecological systems structure. As a result of this study, thoughtful consideration of the following applications to child abuse prevention/intervention programs serving low income populations are suggested.

Ecological Programming Implications

Ontogenetic

- Discuss past and present feelings of shame, loyalty, fear, confusion, power, control, age and gender privileges, unhappiness, and frustration.
- Consider each family's life cycle stage; discuss issues, transitions, and changes in role, structure and function.
- Identify family strengths and encourage development of family resources.

Microsystem

- Provide a 2 year educational program.

- Construct, with each participant, primary goals to reach during program involvement.
- Allow participants' input in program design and content without sacrificing program goals and known needs.
- Strengthen program curriculum in addressing personhood of the parent issues in order to lessen rigidity, problems with child and self, problems with family, problems with others.
- Analyze recursive interactions between parent-child, family-extended family, family-helping systems. Work on changing dysfunctional interactional patterns and increasing communication and conflict resolution skills.
- Help parents recognize and respond sensitively to children's cues.
- Help parents recognize when they and their children are reaching their thresholds for stimulation and teach them how to reduce stimulation in acceptable ways.
- Discuss roles played by family members; restructure as necessary.
- Discuss family rhythmicity and the need for predictability and regularity in ongoing family life.
- Nurture the parents and teach them to nurture the children.
- Encourage support groups during and after formal educational programs to decrease insularity.
- Match parental strengths with identified opportunities and encourage participation in jobs skills training.

Mesosystem

- Help families establish permeable boundaries between themselves, extended family, and other societal institutions such as social agencies and medical personnel.
- Practice communication skills for negotiating larger systems such as social, legal, medical, & educational systems.
- Demonstrate trust, respect, adult education, and other empowering techniques.
- Direct parents to affordable family therapy to decrease household discord.

Exosystem

- Practice problem solving skills so that parents can find community resources that meet their needs.
- Link parents with affordable, available medical care.
- Help parents identify affordable, available drug treatment centers that accept mothers and children.
- Visit affordable, accessible recreational and educational facilities to encourage parents to participate with their children.

Macrosystem

- Discuss parents' beliefs about violence to ascertain religious or cultural beliefs that support violent behavior; nullify or restructure, as appropriate.
- Consider the values, beliefs, and goals of each family and its interacting systems to identify potential conflicts; plan strategies to reduce conflict.

- Utilize media and community organizations to begin to shift community standards to non-violent punishment methods.
- Educate community regarding parents' situations and the barriers that communities unknowingly, perhaps, put up that prevent parents from getting out of the abuse cycle.

Summary

This study attempted to determine if the educational program of the Resource Center reduced the participants' potential to abuse children. The findings suggest that second year parents appeared to benefit from the program, indicating a program of at least two years' duration continue. Suggestions for similar programs are made.

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Table 1

Marital Status, Race, and Referral Source

	1st Year[a] Group	2nd Year[b] Group	Agency[c] Referred	Self[d] Referred
Characteristic	n	n	n	n
Marital Status				
Single	3	6	8	1
Married	5	3	2	6
Race				
African-American	2	3	2	3
Caucasian	5	6	7	4
Hispanic	1	0	1	0
Referral				
Agency	4	6		
Self	4	3		

N = 17, [a]n = 8, [b]n = 9, [c]n = 10, [d]n = 7

Table 2

Groups 1 and 2 Pretest Abuse and Factor Scale Score Means and Standard Deviations

	Group 1[a]		Group 2[b]	
Category	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Abuse[c]	233.88	112.16	255.22	85.51
Distress[d]	151.25	73.43	181.33	60.91
Rigidity[e]	19.88	12.25	14.67	10.40
Unhappiness[f]	19.38	20.49	21.56	17.42
Problems[g] with child and self	12.00	8.16	7.67	6.76
Problems[h] with family	13.63	16.10	10.78	12.66
Problems[i] with others	17.75	8.80	17.44	8.17

Note. N = 17.

[a]Group 1 = first Resource Center parents. [b]Group 2 = second Resource Center parents. cAn elevated abuse score ≥ = 215. [d]An elevated distress score ≥ 152. [e]An elevated rigidity score ≥ 12.5. [f]An elevated unhappiness score ≥ 9.2. [g]An elevated problems with child and self score ≥ 5.2. [h]An elevated problems with family score ≥ 7.0. [i]An elevated problems with others score ≥ 8.6.

Table 3

Second Year Parents' Pre- and Posttest Abuse and Factor Scale Score Means, Standard Deviations, *t*-values, and Significance Levels

	Pretest		Posttest		
Category	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	*t*-value
Abuse[a]	255.22	85.51	212.89	110.62	2.00*
Distress[b]	181.33	60.91	150.89	85.09	2.07*
Unhappiness[c]	21.56	17.42	11.78	10.72	2.13*

Note. N = 9.

[a]An elevated abuse score ≥ 215. [b]An elevated distress score ≥ 152. [c]An elevated unhappiness score ≥ 9.2.

*Significant at $p \leq .04$.

Table 4

Agency- and Self-referred Parents' Pretest Abuse Scale Score Means, Standard Deviations, *t*-value, and Significance Level

	Agency		Self		
Category	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	*t*-Value
Abuse[a]	275.6	99.8	201.71	77.85	1.71*

Note. N = 17.

[a]An elevated Abuse Score ≥ 215

*Significant at $p \leq .05$.